

First year

Groups :5,6,7& 8

INTRODUCTION TO LINGUISTICS

LESSON THREE

PROPERTIES OF HUMAN LANGUAGE

Human language differentiated from all other forms of signalling by a set of properties which make it a unique type of communication system. Those properties are:

1. Displacement:

It is the ability to use language to talk about things and events not present in the immediate environment (such as past and future time reference). It enables us to describe things and places which we are not even so sure of their existence. The meaning of animal signals, by contrast, is restricted to the setting in which they are used; a hunger cry, for example, means that hunger is present 'now', not yesterday or tomorrow.

2. Arbitrariness:

There is no natural or iconic relation between a linguistic form and its meaning. There is nothing in the way the word 'table' is pronounced or written which physically resembles the thing 'table'. In language, only few words have sounds which echo with the sounds made by the object or the activity to which those words refer. These words are rare and the vast majority of linguistic expressions are in fact arbitrary.

3. Productivity:

The capacity of language users to produce and understand an indefinitely large number of sentences; also referred to as *creativity*. New utterances are continually being created, and the language users manipulate their linguistic resources to produce novel expressions and

sentences. A child, for instance, learning a language is active in forming and producing utterances which she or he has never heard before.

4. Cultural Transmission:

Language is passed from one generation to another not genetically or biologically but through a process of teaching and learning, for example, a Chinese child born in England is likely to inherit some physical characteristics from his parents genetically but develops not necessarily the Chinese language. This child will learn and use the English language which he acquires part of his culture.

5. Discreteness:

The sounds used in language are meaningfully distinct. Each sound is treated as a discrete unit, and the occurrence of one sound instead of the other leads to a misuse of language. For example, /p/ and /b/ sounds in a sentence like: “can I park here” the use of the sound /b/ instead of /p/ is a wrong use of language.

6. Duality of Structure (Double Articulation):

Language is structurally organized into two abstract levels. The discrete forms combined in different ways give different meaningful units. That is, at one level, we have distinct sounds and at the other level we have distinct meanings. For example, the sounds /a/, /e/, /t/ none of these discrete forms has any intrinsic meaning. When we produce those sounds in different combinations, as in ate, eat, tea we have different meaningful units.

These six properties may be taken as the core features of human language. Human language does of course have many other properties, but these are not uniquely human characteristics.

Vocal-Auditory Channel:

is certainly a feature of human speech. Human linguistic communication is typically generated via the vocal organs and perceived via the ears. Linguistic communication, however, can also be transmitted without sound, via writing or via the sign languages of the deaf. Moreover, many other species (e.g. dolphins) use the vocal-auditory channel. Thus, this property is not a defining feature of human language.

Reciprocity: any speaker/sender of a linguistic signal can also be a listener/receiver.

Specialization: linguistic signals do not normally serve any other type of purpose, such as breathing or feeding.

Non-Directionality: linguistic signals can be picked up by anyone within hearing, even unseen.

Rapid Fade: linguistic signals are produced and disappear quickly.